

# Introduction: Family minded policy and whole family practice - developing a critical research framework

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# Introduction: Family Minded Policy and Whole Family Practice – Developing a Critical Research Framework

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During the first decade of the twenty-first century, UK policy and practice has become increasingly overt in its concern with *families*. In January 2010, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, 2010) launched the *Support for All: The Families and Relationships Green Paper*. In its Foreword, Ed Balls, the then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, presented ‘Strong, stable families’ as ‘the bedrock of our society’, positioning the Green Paper as ‘supporting families to help themselves’, whilst ‘ensuring that all public services play their part in supporting strong and resilient family relationships’ (DCSF, 2010: 3). The Centre for Social Justice offered an immediate response with its own *Green Paper on the Family*, emphasising the role of ‘family breakdown’ as ‘the root’ of ‘pathways to poverty’ for many, as well as a barrier to appropriate childhood development and positive ‘future life outcomes’ (Centre for Social Justice, 2010: 4).

Whilst the language, analysis and intent within the two reports may differ (as reflected in the associated electoral debate), both documents emphasise the need to support families at particular risk. The Centre for Social Justice (2010: 4) urge intervention where family life is ‘fractured, dysfunctional or chaotic’ and highlight how family breakdown is particularly ‘devastating our most deprived communities’. The DCSF (2010: 3) highlight those ‘families in our society with complex needs and others who require additional – and sometimes non-negotiable – support’. This emphasis is not new, as identified by recent reviews of policy and practice, which demonstrate that the focus on family has been particularly prominent in relation to services for families considered ‘at risk’ of social exclusion and intergenerational disadvantage (Morris *et al.*, 2008; Dodds, 2009).

This themed section draws on a varied body of research and analysis that has both informed and critiqued this recent trend in policy and practice. In this introduction, we consider this developing policy agenda so as to provide a backdrop to the subsequent papers. We also outline the main themes developed within this issue though a consideration of the emergent research framework suggested by the various analyses.

## ‘Thinking Family’ in supporting those ‘at risk’

The publication of *Think Family: Improving the Life Chances of Families at Risk* by the Cabinet Office’s Social Exclusion Task Force (SETF, 2008) signalled an intention across government to develop integrated systems of services able to respond to complex difficulties sometimes faced by families. This ambition ‘for all families to be better supported, including those at risk’ (SETF, 2008: 18) is pursued by seeking to place the development of family strengths and flexibility in delivery at the core of integrated services. Services which support family, it is argued, are those which build on ‘family strengths’

and are 'tailored' to their specific circumstances. Achieving 'think family' would mean that there is 'no wrong door' for families to initially go through. By implication, this should also mean that the professionals on the other side of that 'door' are able to look at requirements across the whole family, rather than fragmenting needs, or necessarily becoming focused on only one family member's experience.

This particular policy stream has also focused on practices and interventions that seek to work with the family as a collective, commonly referred to as 'whole family approaches'. Morris *et al.* (2008: 71) present such approaches as distinct from other forms of family-minded practice in that 'rather than addressing the needs of the service user or individual family members in isolation, provision recognises and focuses on shared needs and/or the strengths apparent in interrelationships and collective assets'. In presenting *Some Useful Sources*, in this issue, Loveless and Hickling detail a number of these interventions, including the high profile implementation of Family Nurse Partnerships, Multi-Systemic Therapy and Family Intervention Projects.

### **Building family mindedness in social policy**

Any calls to ensure that researchers, practitioners and policy makers work primarily with an understanding of the complexity of individuals' lives within their personal networks and communities, should be assessed as critically as those approaches which individualise the support requirements of people who use services. In the aftermath of significant reorganisation of services in social care within many local councils, our current examination of what it means to 'think family' occurs within an environment where there are concerns about fragmentation. There is a clear need to ensure that different fields of social care are supported to work collaboratively together, as well as with other agencies. The recent focus of government on 'whole family' thinking provides an opportunity to develop a critical space where the construction of 'family', of 'complex' family support requirements and of specific ways of working with families facing multiple difficulties can be examined.

Social policy and social work academics will need to engage more often with colleagues in other disciplinary and practice fields, if there is to be incisive examination of elements of family policy which are cross-governmental in their aims. This themed section builds on the work of an international network of academics from social work, education, health, psychology, criminology, law and social policy. This network came together with policy makers, service managers and practitioners at a symposium entitled 'Whole Family Approaches: Building Knowledge Across Disciplines', hosted at the University of Birmingham in September 2009. The format of the symposium was one of questioning and interrogation of current representations of 'family', 'thinking family' and 'doing family' within UK policy and practice. The discussion centred around three core themes: the tension in the construction of family troubles as either a public or private concern; the need to recognise and respond to non-normative family structures and practices; and the appropriateness (or otherwise) of 'whole family' approaches.

#### *A private or public concern?*

The right to private family life and the public interest in family intervention is a core tension within debates concerning the support of families. As noted above, *Think Family*

stated the importance of family minded practice 'for all families'. However, in parallel it emphasised the need to engage 'families at risk' of social exclusion. There may be a contradiction in this distinction. Whilst the identification of a small number of families as being 'at risk' on the one hand provides opportunities to consider how to deliver support to those who need it, on the other it is demarcating a particular group of families as having complex needs best met through identification as a public concern. There is therefore a need to question the language or discourse used to describe the family and the particular 'problem' to be tackled, if a potential source of resistance to seeking support is to be avoided.

#### *Non-normative as problematic?*

A further issue that must be considered is the extent to which different family practices (such as extended family support, parenting methods and child rearing within or across households) are understood in the development of family-minded policies and services. Of particular concern is the potential for approaches to problematise specific families, without engaging with differences as sources of strength or resilience. For example, Barn *et al.* (2006) reported that the perspectives of 'ordinary' minority ethnic families are not recognised, and that the range of complex patterns of family life should be understood with reference to factors such as migration histories, racism, poverty and culture. A body of research across multiple policy areas indicates that minority ethnic families are not engaging with family support services (see, for example, Morris *et al.*, 2006). For family-focused services to engage marginalised families and deliver effectively, the reality of family life must be understood and the potential limitations of normative portrayals of 'family' recognised.

#### *The appropriateness of a 'whole family approach'*

In a range of different policy and service arenas, there may be particular risk in *not* identifying an individual's support needs with reference to their family role, and local family and community network. Approaches which are specifically targeted at the *whole* family may not respond adequately to individuals who have needs in relation to, for example, safety, experience of disability or caring responsibilities. Whole family support might therefore necessarily be understood as *additional* to the identification of individuals' roles and relationships (such as parent or child), and instead seek to provide a 'joined up' response to difficulties faced in the private context of family life.

### **An emerging research framework**

The papers within this themed section of *Social Policy and Society* represent the work of a number of symposium participants in seeking to address these core cross-cutting issues, as well as a range of more specific concerns. The authors achieve an examination of current evidence and analysis of family mindedness within policy, particularly in relation to families facing substantial or multiple difficulties. A further explicit aim of this collection has been to raise further questions to stimulate future work. Taken as a whole, they indicate the potential value in developing an explicit research framework able to support

engagement within social policy and across disciplines and professional domains, based on the following dimensions:

- interrogating representations of family in policy,
- modelling practice approaches,
- understanding family for policy and practice,
- maintaining a focus on individuals within their family contexts,
- identifying the dynamics of inequality and the operation of power.

#### *Interrogating representations of family in policy*

*Murray and Barnes* examine the ways in which family has been constructed within policy across a number of social policy fields. The terminology of 'whole family approaches' suggests an inclusive image of family, for example including families where child care does not feature or where older and younger generations are understood as providers as well as potential receivers of support within relationships. Their article highlights the extent to which there is often a very narrow conceptualisation of family within policy, usually focused on child welfare and parental responsibility.

#### *Modelling practice approaches*

The field to which family mindedness has been applied in relation to both policy and practice is diverse, and yet if analysis of approaches in different areas is to be conducted it is vital that debates take place with access to shared language, knowledge and understanding. *Hughes* provides a 'map' of family-focused practices and interventions, identifying three different ways in which family support is delivered both in relation to interventions which focus on 'support', and those which seek to minimise risks. This model does not seek to assess the appropriateness of or value in engaging in different forms of family work, rather it seeks to provide an account of the different rationales that exist in current practice and that purport to be family minded in their approach.

#### *Understanding families for policy and practice*

*Morris and Featherstone* identify that the dominant service-led approach to much policy and practice research has resulted in a lack of dialogue with families deemed vulnerable, and therefore a significantly weak knowledge base concerning families lived experiences, their strengths and concerns. Further research which explores lived experience of family, informed by the ethic of care, is required to inform policy and practice. *Murray and Barnes* demonstrate the ways in which family policy develops perspectives on the family that are not reflective of 'families in practice' and instead are built on normative understandings of family lives.

#### *Maintaining a focus on individuals within their family contexts*

Involving family within assessments and direct support work may not always be the most appropriate outcome of policy and practice, but *consideration* to family issues is arguably always appropriate. It is very difficult to identify situations where support

around (or consideration of) family issues might not be usefully offered. *Clarke* identifies that increasing the visibility of disabled people who are parents, without resort to use of a 'risk lens', requires a continued effort in (both individual and family focused) research, policy and practice. *Tew and Nixon* demonstrate that even where risks are present within family life the lived experiences of parents and children are often not attended to within current practice models.

*Identifying the dynamics of inequality and operation of power*

*Clarke's* account of the ways in which disabled parents are represented in policy debate demonstrate the risks inherent in focusing on the consequences of social inequalities (often misrepresented as individually rather than socially derived) rather than the causes (which may not be fully challenged if only responded to at an individual or family level). *Tew and Nixon* provide a specific account of relations in families where parent abuse occurs and demonstrate a need for services to work with families to transform power imbalances and overcome patterns of family violence. *Hughes* identifies that it is of value to consider what discourses, which focus on family risks and family strengths, seek to achieve, as well as provide an account of their operation within policy and practice.

The themed section concludes with a guide to *Some Useful Sources*, which focuses upon key recent policy documents and accounts of specific family interventions.

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